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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a chapter from my new memoir. Stay tuned if you want more.

Chapter 10: SociopathGate

“Are you a dog?” My grandmother said.

Her voice roared through the phone. It was so loud that I could hear her clearly from the receiver pressed against my babysitter’s ear. She waited in silence for my babysitter to respond.

“No...” She returned sheepishly.

It was incredible. I had never seen a human being become so small so fast. Just five minutes earlier, this woman had bitten me like an animal.

Blood ran from the teeth marks she left on my chest. I screamed. And suddenly, I was afraid for my life. I was trembling. I might have even peed my pants. I felt like a rabbit in a fox’s mouth.

And now, this beast suddenly morphed into the world’s most pathetic worm.

“I thought only dogs bit people.” My grandmother said.

I was already starting to feel better with my grandmother on the phone. But my chest still burned like fire. In my five short years, I had never heard of my grandmother like this. She was well known for her anger and her war-hardened personality... but even still, I had never seen this.

“Listen here, child.” My grandmother said.

“You pack your things right up and leave the house RIGHT NOW.”

“Leave the children there.” She said. “I’m going to catch a bus right now, and if you’re still there when I get there, I’m going to kill you.”

With that, my babysitter packed her things in tears and sobs and got out of dodge.

It wasn't the only time she saved my life...

There was a different babysitter after that. Her name was Desdemona. This one hated children with all her guts.

She watched The Young and The Restless all day. She would cook rice and chicken for lunch but only feed us the rice and take the chicken home to feed her children. Those details are fuzzy.

She never wanted us to play with our toys or be any more animated than the furniture. If we did, we would get our asses beat. I was deathly scared of this one. I just sat in my little chair all day and said nothing. I tried to be invisible.

My grandmother dropped by during the day out of the blue. She wanted to see her grandkids. Aaliyah was in her tiny bed, and I was in my little chair, trying to make my best human statue impression. We get a knock on the door. Desdemona opens the door to greet my grandmother. She arrived in a good mood, happy demeanor and a smile. But it didn't take longer than two minutes to realize something was wrong.

"Why aren't the children playing?" She said.

"No reason," Desdemona said. "They're fine."

"No, they're not." She said. Then she crouched down to my level. "Why aren't you playing, Anton?"

I responded without a word. I was so scared that I lost my voice entirely. I could not speak. Even if I could, I didn't know whether to tell her the truth or lie and pretend everything was fine. I just knew there would be consequences for going against Desdemona. Either way, my grandmother was on high alert after I gave her no answer. She grabbed one of my toys—a red firetruck—and handed it to me.

"Here." She said.

I wouldn't even dare reach for the toy.

“It’s fine.” She said. “You can play with your toy.”

With that, I timidly took the truck and began to “drive” it on the floor. My grandmother had figured Desdemona out by then. She proceeded to make the world right again. Lucia style — which means Desdemona got her ass handed to her. It was her finest moment.

Those bite marks faded away sometime after I became a teenager. But the psychological scars lasted even longer. To this day, I still have this same problem. I want to speak up, be assertive, and count and matter...

And I choke. All of a sudden, the cat’s got my tongue. I am emotionally crippled. My ability to assert boundaries has been impaired.

I’m like a little wounded duck around a pack of wolves. I can’t speak up... which means I never tell people no... nobody ever feels consequences when they cross my boundaries because they don’t exist in the first place... which means people walk all over me... which means I keep trying to subconsciously fix this trauma by being around people who can’t hear me. It was all a vicious cycle.

I tell myself that this was the moment when this trigger was formed. Although, to be fair, I can’t be sure. It could have just as well been any of the times my father gave me a backhand, punch, choke, or belt for speaking my mind. It could have also come from my school and church, which taught me not to challenge authority. Maybe it was because, in kindergarten, I got into a fight at school, and my mother told me, “Don’t fight back.” And those words just seared into my brain forever.

There were lots of options to choose from.

But this particular incident seems right. That feeling of invisibility had never been more palpable.

I wish I could be assertive like my grandmother. At 28, I could be guilt-tripped into doing just about anything — and Erika had figured that out. So, that’s precisely how she controlled my behavior. Anytime I did or didn’t do something she wanted or didn’t want, she could paint me as the “bad guy,”

which would be more than enough to keep me in line. I was a total slave to my need for her approval.

Meanwhile, I slowly discovered that Erika believed she could get away with anything with impunity.

My grandmother was a little feral. She was orphaned at age 8, and the way she told it, she raised herself. She had to survive in the wild. Once, she argued in the streets with a lady after church.

I remember her yelling at her opponent from across the street, “Your breasts are so long, they touch your knees.”

I was completely different. A stranger could waltz into my life and immediately take the whole thing over.

That’s precisely what happened on New Year’s Eve 2018.

It was New Year’s Eve, and Erika and I were out for a night at the bar, counting down to midnight. We were there on Jenny’s recommendation. “You’ll love him,” she’d said about Marcus. “He’s charming, interesting—a real smooth talker.”

So when he walked in—tall, loud, and magnetic with that confident, easy charm—it felt like an opportunity to make a good impression. We wanted to keep the night light and friendly, enjoy ourselves, and see fireworks later.

Marcus leaned in close, spilling story after story, his eyes flicking back and forth to ensure we were hanging on every word. At first, his stories were entertaining. But his delivery was too smooth and calculated, as if every detail had been rehearsed. Each story got wilder and more intense, and we could sense something was off. It was like he was daring us to see through him.

“Have you always been this intense?” I asked, trying to keep it light.

“Intense?” he laughed, a little too loud. “You could say that.” He leaned in, voice dropping as if sharing a secret.

“I’ve lived a life most people wouldn’t believe.” He paused, giving us a look that was part amusement, part challenge. “I bet you’d never guess what I’ve done.”

By midnight, Marcus had convinced us to take him to an isolated lookout point where he could see the skyline—it was one of the best places to watch fireworks.

So we all piled into my car, with Marcus sprawled out in the front seat as if he owned it. Erika got shoved into the back, shooting me a look that said, “Am I seriously sitting in the back seat?”

During the drive, his charm started to feel more like control. Halfway there, he pulled out a cigarette, flicking the lighter as he moved to light it in my car.

“Not in here,” I said, my voice firm but my nerves jangling, suddenly unsure if I’d overstepped.

His smirk faded, his eyes narrowing as he paused, holding the cigarette and lighter in his hands as if weighing his options. I could feel his irritation, the way he bristled at being told what he could and couldn’t do. He gave a forced grin, putting the cigarette away with a little laugh that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Hey, no problem,” he said tightly, his tone casual but his expression still hard. “Wouldn’t want to upset you, right?” His voice held a challenge, a reminder that he’d let me off the hook—this time.

Even though he acted out, I immediately felt a pang of guilt for upsetting him. I didn’t want to offend him or seem uptight, and I mumbled, “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Oh, I know,” he replied, a flat smile. “It’s fine.” He settled back into his seat, still watching me, that fake smile lingering, daring me to do anything about it.

His stories took a darker turn. As we made our way up the rocky road, he leaned back in the front seat, his tone shifting as he started describing his “past.” He talked about being molested as a child, then drifted into a brutal assault he’d survived in the military. His words were chilling, but his tone was too smooth, too detached. He kept glancing over, watching us, studying our reactions with an unsettling calm.

When we finally parked, I thought the worst of the tension was over, but then, out of nowhere, he reached over and grabbed my chest, squeezing like he had every right.

I froze. The shock and violation paralyzed me. It was more than just a touch —a line he crossed so quickly and boldly that I couldn’t find my voice. My throat tightened, words failing me right when I needed them most. I glanced at him, and there it was—that smug smile like he was daring me to react.

The first fireworks exploded over the skyline in the distance, and I could see them reflected in the windshield. It felt surreal, watching the colors light up the night sky while this guy sat beside me, completely unfazed by what he’d just done. I felt trapped. He was bigger than me, ex-military, and we were in the middle of nowhere. Every instinct told me to get away, but I didn’t know how without making things worse.

In the silence, I glanced back at Erika, feeling the tension hanging between us, and whispered, “Is this guy a sociopath?”

She met my gaze, her eyes wide and specific. “Yes.”

And it hit me just how real it all was. Erika and I had been reading up on psychopathy, studying every sign—glib charm, lying, manipulation, lack of empathy. We knew the list almost by heart, and seeing each trait play out in real life right before us was horrifying. He was reading straight from a script, following the checklist, one trait at a time.

I realized then that he was precisely the type who would somehow end up on my couch, never leaving, moving in without permission, and helping

himself to my life and my bank account until nothing was left.

Her nod gave me the resolve I needed. I took a deep, steadyng breath, fingers gripping the steering wheel as I started the car, ignoring the fireworks bursting above us. Marcus kept talking, oblivious to the change in our plan, as I turned the car around and headed back to town. My heart was pounding, but my mind was clear: I needed to get us out of there.

When we got back to the bar, I barely waited for him to get out before I locked the doors, gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles as he walked away.

But it didn't end there. Over the next few months, we'd see him around town, and every time, he'd flash that same smug smile, catching my eye as if to say, I know you're scared. He seemed to get some sick satisfaction from it, as if our fear was a game. Every time we saw him, my stomach would drop, a wave of nausea hitting us as he looked at us with those same cold eyes.

The next day, we tried to warn people, especially Jenny, who had introduced us to him.

"Oh, come on," she said, laughing. "Marcus's not that bad. You two are just paranoid."

I shook my head, trying to make her understand. "You don't get it. This guy is dangerous. I mean, he ticks every box."

She rolled her eyes. "So he's a little intense. You're overreacting. I think he's pretty amazing."

Erika jumped in, frustrated. "Amazing? Are you kidding? He's a maniac."

But Jenny just waved it off. "You guys don't understand him. Maybe he's rough around the edges, but he's been through a lot. It probably explains some of his behavior."

We also tried telling Phil and Joanne, hoping they would see the red flags. After all, they knew his father.

“Oh, we know his dad,” Joanne said, shaking her head. “He’s got a reputation. A Pathological liar is a real piece of work. I guess it runs in the family.”

“Don’t you think that’s a red flag?” I asked, trying to make them see.

Joanne shrugged. “Maybe, but it’s probably not as bad as you think. You guys might just be overthinking it.”

After that, it was like no one wanted to hear it. They thought we were paranoid and exaggerating. So we let it go, moved to the U.S., and left that chapter behind us.

Or so I thought—until I saw his name in the news one day.

Marcus Knight—extradited to the U.S. after years of evading justice on charges of possessing child pornography. He’d fled to St. Lucia shortly after being caught in the U.S., dodging extradition for years by slipping through a legal loophole. Only when St. Lucia finally closed that loophole could authorities send him back to face his crimes.

“Thanks to coordination between international authorities, Marcus Knight can’t hide from the law any longer,” one judge was quoted as saying. “He thought he could charm his way to freedom. But today, justice finally caught up with him.”

There was a photograph on the press release. He was standing in court in handcuffs—his lawyer at his side. I recognized him. But there wasn’t much of his face for two reasons. First, this was during COVID-19, so he was wearing a mask. Second, because I had never seen someone hang their head so low in shame, it seemed as if I was witnessing a spiritual event. Maybe there was still a shred of humanity in him left after all. I suspect they took the photograph seconds after handing him his 25-year sentence.

Most horrifying, we later learned that his mother had run a preschool out of her house. It wasn't too big a leap in my judgment to believe that he was preying on those children inside that preschool.

Worst New Year's Eve ever.